

*Historia Fidei Lux*

Gathered Fragments

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Paying the Price of the Pews

By Father James Garvey

Churches in Europe first introduced pews with backrests during the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. Previous to that time, worshipers stood, or sat on small stools or benches. The construction of many pews to fill a large church could be a financial burden on the parish. The practice arose of renting choicely positioned pews to more affluent parishioners to help underwrite these construction costs. However, small benches were maintained at the back of the church for the poor, underprivileged, and servants.

Soon the custom was in place to sell or rent pews to underwrite the cost of con-

structing the church, building the pews, and to fund general operating expenses associated with the parish. St. Mary's Church in Philadelphia kept a

rented within certain sections of the church, i.e., east gallery, lower pews, south gallery, etc. The trustees of St. Mary's Church determined the pew

charges and all other financial matters for the parish. In 1787 the pews were put up for auction. The highest bidder or subscriber had the first choice of a pew. At the same time the yearly rent of each pew was determined. This rent was to be paid semiannually, June 24 and December 8. Other parishes collected pew rent quarterly. Past-due rent was accepted any time. In 1892 St. Paul's Cathedral in Pittsburgh derived a little over ten percent

of its income from pew rent.

Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish congregations alike



The pews of old St. Paul's, an artist's rendering.

pew register from 1787 to 1791. The register indicated that particular pews could be

collected pew rent from parishioners. October 22, 1910, the Gates of Wisdom Synagogue, 3539 Townsend Street, Pittsburgh, issued a deed to Mr. A. Galanty for seat no. 132 downstairs and seat no. 132 in the ladies' gallery.

The annual rent was \$100. Oct. 20, 1910, the same congregation issued a deed for seat no. 21 downstairs and seat no. 21 in the ladies gallery to J. Rosenberg for \$250. Rodef Shalom Synagogue was incorporated in Allegheny County in 1856. This congregation later moved to Oakland. It had a policy in place whereby members of the congregation could buy or rent pews. There were three classes of pews at three different prices. In 1920 a committee was formed to study a system of unassigned pews. The committee made three reports over two years. In 1922 the system of pew rental at Rodef Shalom was discontinued in favor of a system of collecting dues from the members. The dollar amount of dues was predicated on the income of the member/family.

St. Thomas Mission, Charles Country, Md., kept two pew-rent books, one for white

families and one for black families. Families paid rent for the pews they occupied each Sunday. The income from pew rent helped to pay the pastor's salary and other operating expenses of the



The pews of St. Philomena's in the Strip District, 1917.

parish. The pews in the best locations cost more. If families could not afford to pay the pew rent, sometimes work in-kind was done to cover this cost. In one instance, those who could not pay their pew rent could bring the equivalent amount in wood to help heat the church. President George Washington and other vestrymen at Pohick Church near Mount Vernon financed a building in 1774 by selling pews. Well into the twentieth century, the Episcopal churches in Rhode Island continued the practice of as-

signing specific pews in the church to families or individuals who paid a one-time fee plus additional rental fees or taxes for the privilege of having a pew assigned to them.

The individual or family received a deed to the pew and could will it, or assign it, to an heir or another parishioner as long as the rental fee or tax payments were current. Dr. Durfee a member of Central Congregational Church, Fall River, Mass., bid \$400 for a choice pew for which the rent was an additional \$400 a year. The bid paid for the choice of a pew; the annual rent was in addition to that fee. A few less prominently positioned pews rented for \$100 each. Other pews were as low as \$15 and some individual seats were let at \$5. Some churches collected only fifty cents from widows.

St. Alphonsus Catholic Church, Grand Rapids, Mich., marked its 25th anniversary in 1914. The parish regulations at that time stated, "All members of the parish should have their names entered in the Pew Rent

Register. This rule includes single men and women, as well as the married. There are single sittings for the single wage-earner or salary-drawer. Pew rent is to be paid quarterly in advance. Pew holders requiring more time to pay their pew-rent should notify the Pastor. No pews will be reserved after the Gloria of the Mass has commenced. If anyone . . . cannot rent a sitting, let him inform the Pastor and he shall have a sitting assigned to him and receive credit for full payment in the annual report. This is all we require of the poor."

St. Luke's, Enmore, Sydney, Australia, derived a substantial source of income from pew rent. This payment also entitled the seat-holder to elect church wardens and synod representatives. In some churches there were high box pews with a door or gate on each aisle.

The pews were designed that way to retain heat generated from coal-fired foot-warmers. Noted on the outside of the pew door was a roman numeral used to identify which pew a parishioner had rented. In some cases ornate pew construction reflected the wealth of their owners.

The financial statement for United Reformed Church, Twickenham, England, in 1911 indicates that £80 was collected from pew subscription, £160 from Sunday collection and donations, and £80

from bazaars and similar efforts. In 1911 pew rents were replaced with freewill offerings.

Among certain Methodist congregations the notion of paying pew rent was thought to cause the poor to stay away from Sunday services. These Churches often included the word "free" in the name of the church to indicate that no pew rent would be charged any person who attended services. These churches may have given up pew rent, but they always took up a free-will offering to help cover expenses.

From colonial times until mid-twentieth century, collecting pew rent was a useful way for parishes to generate income to meet expenses. However, the practice of collecting pew rent began to be discontinued by inner-city Anglicans churches in Australia in 1896, and was completely abolished after World War II. It was much the same in the Catholic community. In 1922 Sacred Heart Church, Waterloo, Iowa, discontinued pew rent and began using an envelope system. In 1904, Rabbi Leo M. Franklin at Temple Beth El, Bloomfield Hills (near Detroit), Michigan, wrote an article: "A New Congregational Policy," indicating that pew rents would be discontinued in favor of a dues system to help pay expenses at the Temple.

The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in the Archdiocese of Denver continued to collect pew rent of 25 cents per adult and ten cents per child until 1947 when the practice was discontinued in favor of the regular use of offertory envelopes during the collection. By the late 1940s most Catholic churches in the United States had discontinued pew rents. After that time there was in effect a policy of open seating, and pews for Sunday services were no longer reserved for particular families. A new envelope system to provide financial support for the parish was introduced. Each family in the parish was supplied with a box of contribution envelopes for the fifty-two Sundays each year, holy days, and special collections. Today many parishes mail packets of offering envelopes monthly, quarterly, or annually to each family in the parish. The family encloses money in the envelope, and then places the envelope in the basket when the ushers take up the offertory collection pew by pew following the homily.

Father James Garvey is parochial vicar at St. Margaret Mary Parish, Moon Twp. This article is condensed from his forthcoming book, St. Paul Cathedral Parish: The Early Years 1834-1903. All sources are cited in the book, which is slated for publication this fall.

All the News That's Fit for Catholics — in German

For more than a century, Pittsburgh's large and vital German community was able to transact all its business in its mother tongue. Certain neighborhoods, especially in parts of Allegheny, were almost entirely German-speaking. Even the big department stores downtown employed German-speaking clerks. A German in Pittsburgh might live his whole life without having to learn English. In the mid-19th century, when Father (now Blessed) Francis X. Seelos was pastor of St. Philomena in the Strip District, priests of the parish even founded a German daily newspaper — the only Catholic daily ever published in Pittsburgh. Known as the *Pittsburgher Beobachter*

("Pittsburgh Observer"), it prospered for half a century, later adding a Sunday edition called the *Katholisches Familienblatt* ("Catholic Family Paper"). Pittsburgh had daily newspapers in German right up to the beginning of World War II.



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